

# **News**

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## **DEMENTIA TRAINING PROGRAM HELPS FIRST RESPONDERS**

MOUNT CLEMENS, Mich. – As Officer Jim Wagner of the St. Clair Shores Police Department began talking with the elderly woman who was just in a car accident, he could tell there was something not quite right about the situation.

“She seemed like she was lost, despite being quite close to her home,” Wagner said. “She also couldn’t comprehend what insurance papers or registration papers were.”

Fortunately, Officer Wagner recently completed a program offered by the Macomb County Senior Citizen Services Department that trains police, firefighters and other first responders how to spot and react to dementia in the elderly.

When dealing with those affected by dementia-related illnesses, most problems for first responders like Officer Wagner stem from not being able to recognize the warning signs, said Karen Bisdorf, acting director of the Senior Citizen Services Department.

“Dementia-related illnesses, such as Alzheimer’s disease, can make those affected appear to be hostile, irrational or even intoxicated,” Bisdorf said. “Sometimes just asking a simple question of an affected person can cause a problem, making the situation even more difficult.”

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Even if first responders are able to recognize these symptoms, there often is a lack of available information on what to do next, Bisdorf said.

In order to combat this, the Senior Citizen Services Department is traveling the county to educate first responders with its program “Reaching Beyond the Shadows: An Overview of Dementia.” This presentation is also available to any group or organization if requested.

“Those who complete this training are definitely taking away some very valuable information,” said Kathryn-Ann W. Kozlinski, who teaches the sessions and also serves as program supervisor of the Macomb County Adult Day Service program. “We know that we have information that will make the officers’ jobs easier and hopefully safer.”

In Officer Wagner’s case, he used the knowledge gained from the seminar to make the correct decision on what to do with the elderly woman in the traffic crash.

“I sent a request to the Secretary of State for a re-evaluation of her driving abilities,” said Wagner. “I also called Kathryn to speak with her more about cognitive impairment, which this woman obviously had.”

Officer Wagner then met with the woman’s family to explain the dangers of her condition such as wandering. Wandering, Wagner said, is when someone forgets where they are or where they are going and just walks, or drives, off not really heading anywhere.

According to Kozlinski, there have been cases of wandering that led to fatalities.

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Since the program began in April 2004, Kozlinski has trained 685 law enforcement officials including those from Shelby Township Police Department; Sterling Heights Police, Fire and EMS; Fraser Police Department; and the Macomb County Sheriff's Department. The program is also a NACo award-winner.

"I have yet to do a presentation where someone wasn't personally affected by the disorders I was describing," said Kozlinski. "Many people don't realize how common dementia-related problems are."

According to her, the response from trainees has been nothing but positive.

"They come away with a new awareness," said Kozlinski. "The program really gives the officers a new respect for themselves and for the job they do."

The program covers several topics, including:

- What is normal aging?
- What are cognitive disorders?
- How should someone with such a disorder be approached?
- How should officers act to better protect themselves?

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**[EDITOR'S NOTE: Media are welcome to attend a dementia training session on Sept. 1 with the Warren Police Department. If you are interested in attending, please contact Lt. Robert Jones at 586-574-4880]**